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Can unhappy marriages become happy again? How?

One advantage of marriage, it seems to me, is that when you fall out of love with each other, it keeps you together until maybe you fall in again.

—Judith Viorst, American author and journalist¹⁰

I think a man and a woman should choose each other for life, for the simple reason that a long life with all its accidents is barely enough for a man and a woman to understand each other; and in this case to understand is to love.

—William Butler Yeats¹¹

Overview: Most unhappy marriages become happy again, if couples can stick it out. While some divorces are necessary, some marriages can be repaired. Some individuals and couples read books or use other resources on their own to help improve their marriages. Others participate in marriage education classes to improve their relationship skills; some resources for finding good marriage education classes are reviewed here. Still others seek counseling from professional counselors or therapists, or seek help from a trusted religious guide. This chapter contains some useful guidelines for choosing a good counselor or therapist to help you repair your marriage. Through dedicated efforts, some couples are able to reconcile and rebuild a happy marriage. Even if your spouse doesn't seem to be interested in working out problems in the marriage, there are things you can do individually that may repair your relationship. Ten characteristics of a healthy marriage are discussed.

Some may be surprised to learn that many unhappy marriages recover. As one respected marriage therapist and researcher, Dr. William J. Doherty at the University

of Minnesota, noted, marriages are not like fruit. When fruit gets bruised or rotten, it doesn't improve with time; you just have to toss it out. Marriages, however, often do improve over time. In a recent study,¹² married Utahns were asked if they ever thought their marriage was in trouble. Nearly half (47%) said "yes." (Utahns were even more likely than Americans in general to report this.) Nearly one in three (29%) married Utahns said that at some time they thought their marriage was in trouble and had thought about divorce. About one in ten (11%) said they had talked to their spouse about a divorce in the last three years. Nationally, about one in seven (13%) married individuals say that they have seriously thought about divorcing their spouse recently.¹³ But more than 94% of married individuals—both men and women—who said that their marriage at some point was in trouble said they were glad they were still together.

One such couple we know worked through a difficult situation with adultery. Four years later they both said they had never been happier. The couple was happy that they had worked through the adultery, which seemed impossible at the time of discovery. Their four children were able to have a complete family and both spouses had gone through forgiveness, healing, and changing. Although this decision may not be right for every couple, this couple was happy about their decision to stay married.

Four years after a situation with adultery, one couple said they had never been happier and were glad they worked through what seemed impossible.

Individuals at the crossroads of divorce sometimes struggle with a false choice: "Do I divorce so that I can find happiness again, or do I stay together for the family's sake and remain unhappy?" But as the next section explains, if they can stick it out, their marriage is likely to become happy again. And there are helpful resources for those willing to work at it.

A. Can unhappy marriages become happy again?

It may be difficult to face the issues that you and your spouse are struggling with, but research suggests that couples that are able to stick it out and stay together usually end up happier down the road than couples who divorce. (Chapter 4 shows that divorce is often not a way back to happiness.) Long-term unhappiness in marriage is uncommon. In a national study, only about 10% of individuals say at any particular time that they are unhappy in their marriages, and only about 2% say they are very unhappy.¹⁴ As this study followed these couples over the next five years, they found that about 15% of these unhappy individuals did divorce. But 85% hung on. The better news is that those who hung on weren't miserable. About two out of three unhappily married adults who avoided divorce ended up happily married to the same spouse five years later. And the unhappiest individuals improved the most; more than three-quarters of the unhappiest individuals who avoided divorce said they were now happy. Couples overcome very serious problems

in their marriages and often do find happiness again. Incidentally, violence in these unhappy relationships was not common; 77% of those that divorced and 85% of those that stayed together reported that an argument had never gotten physical.

Of course, we don't know your situation. Only you can decide what is best for you and your family. (And maybe this decision has been forced on you by your spouse.) We do hope, however, that you will give serious thought to the possibility of trying to strengthen their marriage rather than ending it. You may benefit from exercise 2.1, "Hanging On or Moving On?" at the end of this chapter.

In our interview with "Aaron," he told us how he and his wife hung on through bad times in their marriage. Reflecting on those times more than twenty years later, he was grateful they hung on.

For a number of different reasons, we really struggled early on in our marriage. We were in love but we weren't prepared for things. We were a lot different than we thought. I think people make too much about "compatibility," but yeah, I was amazed at how different we were. And my expectations about what marriage was and how things would be were upset, you know, and I blamed her for that, I guess. I was kinda immature. And she brought some family baggage with her into the marriage that took a long time to work through. . . . And a couple of times she spoke the "D-word" [divorce]. It devastated me. It hurt like nothing I've ever felt. I felt like a failure. But somehow we hung on. I grew up more. She was able to get some help and overcome some of her baggage from an abusive father. And over time, well, we just learned to love and accept each other more. And I guess having gone through hard times like that, you know, you just build an even stronger bond. I'm not saying we have a perfect marriage. We still have things that are hard. But we've built a wonderful life together and raised some wonderful children, and . . . It's scary to think about how close we came to maybe giving that up.

As we will discuss in Chapter 4, some divorced individuals express regret that they and their ex-spouse did not work harder to try to save their marriage, and divorce, in general, does not make life better. The rest of this chapter will discuss ways that individuals and couples can try to improve and strengthen their marriages, including seeking out marriage education classes, getting help from a marriage counselor, and self-guided efforts. Perhaps in your circumstances, however, strengthening your marriage isn't an option. Still, it may be valuable for you to be aware of the information in the next few sections to help you build a healthier relationship in the future.

B. Can couples improve their own marriages without outside help? How?

It may be surprising to learn that most couples who go from unhappy to happy in their marriages do not get help from outside experts such as marriage therapists. Of course, some do seek help from a trained, professional counselor, and some seek help from a

religious leader. Some seek informal help from trusted friends or family members. But some are able to overcome serious issues by themselves with effort and the passage of time. Sometimes the problem has to do more with circumstances outside the marriage that place stress on a relationship—for instance, a job loss or the death of a family member or a health problem—and eventually the stress goes away.¹⁵ Others work on improving their relationship by themselves. “Fran” told us her story about this. Her first marriage ended early on when she discovered her husband’s infidelity. She remarried, but hit some hard times with some basic differences common among men and women. “Fran” described her feelings about the looming possibility of another divorce:

For me anxiety, fear, anger, failure again. Inadequate feelings. For him, anger, frustration, very similar feelings to mine, but only compounded with the male ego, which is a very strong source of energy. He was more emotional than I about it, because I had been thinking about it a long time, and he, being himself, said to me, “I didn’t know anything was wrong.” And then we talked. When I communicated how I felt, he, being the intelligent man he was, understood perfectly. . . . We knew that the children were the future. They were our future They were what we were actually about. We had more to gain from staying together than being apart. We both had to put our egos aside. . . . We both had to look at ourselves. . . . We started trying. We didn’t just wait for things to happen. We scheduled things for ourselves. Not just routine, routine, routine. Every Saturday we had something to do for ourselves. We had a time for [“Deron”] and I, and we had a time for the family.

“Fran” and “Deron” worked through their hard times on their own with communication, understanding, and willingness to change. And years later as we interviewed “Fran,” she described a rich and rewarding long-term marriage; she was sure she made the right decision to work through their problems.

In Box 2.1, we provide a list of excellent books and websites dealing with marriage and how to improve your relationship that may help you. Some of the websites listed have “relationship inventories” or questionnaires that you can take to assess the strengths and weaknesses of your relationship. Some of these websites introduce you to programs you can do on your own to improve your relationship. In Box 2.2 we highlight one excellent resource, a book by perhaps the leading marriage and relationship expert in the world, Dr. John Gottman. The book has many exercises you can do on your own to improve your relationship.

C. Are there classes that can help couples have a healthy, happy marriage?

Marriages don’t come with an instruction manual, but maybe it would help if they did. It seems like you have to go through some formal training for just about any license you get—except a marriage license. (The Utah Healthy Marriage Initiative has a guidebook for engaged and newlywed couples called *The Utah Marriage Handbook: Keys to a Healthy Marriage*. It is available at www.utahmarriage.org.)

Books

- *The Divorce Remedy: The Proven 7-Step Program for Saving Your Marriage*, by Michele Weiner Davis. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001.
- *Can My Marriage Be Saved? True Stories of Saved Marriages*, by Mae Chambers & Erika Chambers. Hendersonville, TN: Pass It On Publications, 2008.
- *Fighting For Your Marriage*, by Howard Markman, Scott Stanley, & Susan Blumberg. New York: Jossey-Bass, 2001.
- *The Power of Commitment: A Guide to Active, Lifelong Love*, by Dr. Scott M. Stanley. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005.
- *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, by John M. Gottman & Nan Silver. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000.
- *The Great Marriage Tune-Up Book: A Proven Program for Evaluating and Renewing Your Relationship*, by Dr. Jeffrey H. Larson. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.
- *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially*, by Linda J. Waite & Maggie Gallagher. New York: Doubleday, 2000.

Websites

- www.utahmarriage.org—Maintained by the Utah Commission on Marriage, the same people responsible for this guidebook.
- www.prepare-enrich.com—Contains an on-line, self-guided relationship questionnaire for evaluating the strengths and weaknesses in your relationship, called “Couple Checkup.” Click on the “Couple Checkup” button to investigate this inexpensive service. The program is done in your home with computer-generated feedback. It was developed by one of the world’s leading relationship educators.
- www.couplecare.info—Introduces you to an inexpensive, mostly self-guided program to work on improving your relationship. You do the work in your home; a trained facilitator will call you from time to time to ask if you have questions and discuss how things are going. The program was developed by some of the world’s leading relationship educators.
- relate.byu.edu—Features a “relationship inventory” that, for a small cost, you can take to get feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of your relationship. The RELATE questionnaire has hundreds of questions to help evaluate your relationship. You take the questionnaire over the Internet and then get quick feedback emailed back to you. It is one of the most thoroughly researched and tested relationship inventories. It has been developed by a team of researchers at Brigham Young University and other universities during the past 25 years.
- www.divorcebusting.com—This website has resources associated with the facts behind divorce topics.
- www.smartmarriages.com—Resources for marriage education classes, literature, statistics, and more.
- www.healthymarriageinfo.org—Developed by the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center, which is funded by the federal government, has helpful links associated with forming and sustaining healthy marriages.



Couples who are at a crossroads may need resources that will help them to repair their marriages. Here we highlight one excellent resource you can use on your own from perhaps the foremost marriage and relationship expert in the world, Dr. John Gottman:

The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work

Dr. John M. Gottman and Nan Silver. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2000.

The book focuses on the seven, researched-based principles at the heart of healthy, successful marriages. In addition, there are numerous exercises or activities throughout the book that help couples learn more about each other, where their marriage might be weak, or where they have the biggest strengths. Some of the exercises help couples rebuild friendship, respect, and admiration. Other exercises help couples analyze their communication and problem-solving skills and improve them. The exercises are based in solid research and counseling experience. They are short and easy to take, either alone or with your spouse.

A recent survey in Utah found that only slightly more than one in four (27%) Utahns reported that they had any kind of formal relationship education or training before marrying, although almost all think that it is valuable to do so.¹⁶ A good piece of news is that those who have married more recently apparently are more likely to have had some kind of preparation for marriage. Still, most Utahns do not invest in formal preparation for marriage. Similarly, we suspect that even fewer Utahns take marriage enrichment classes periodically during their marriage to enhance their marriage and improve their communication skills. Probably most are unaware of the many resources available to help them form and sustain a healthy, happy marriage, or to repair a struggling marriage. The Utah Healthy Marriage Initiative maintains a website of marriage education classes in the state (see www.utahmarriage.org, or call 801-526-9317).

In addition to marriage preparation classes, many states have also been focusing on classes for couples to take during their marriage. Since the mid-1990s, a growing number of states and communities have been investing in more resources to provide couples with marriage education classes.¹⁷ Marriage education is different from marriage counseling or therapy. It brings individuals and couples together, usually in groups of 10–20, and generally provides them with research-based information on what makes marriages work. Some classes are taught by highly trained professionals, but others are taught by individuals who just have a passion for strengthening marriages and have trained to teach a certain curriculum or program. Sometimes religious leaders or people they designate teach these classes. Both professionals and passionate lay people can be effective educators.¹⁸ Marriage education is offered in various places, such as churches, community settings, workplaces, hospitals, schools, and colleges. Some classes are targeted to specific groups of people, such as Hispanic couples, new-parent couples, remarried couples, or

Catholic couples. Many marriage education classes are offered for free, especially when they are run by religious organizations. Other classes charge a fee or “tuition.” Depending on the program, those fees can range from the cost of materials—about \$20—to several hundred dollars. (While several hundred dollars seems like a lot of money, it is a lot less than the cost of a divorce.) Most marriage education classes have about 12 hours of instruction and training, although some programs are a little shorter and a few are longer. Many Utah colleges and universities offer semester-long marriage enrichment classes. Generally, couples are encouraged to attend marriage education classes together, but this may not be a requirement. The classes are interactive, but those who participate in the classes are not encouraged to share very private matters. Many who participate in marriage education classes say that it is helpful for them to hear others in the class talk about their challenges in marriage, but instructors usually control discussion so that people don’t disclose highly personal and private issues and make others uncomfortable.

Some who take marriage education classes are just trying to “tune-up” their relationships to prevent serious problems. Others are experiencing serious problems and have considered divorce. And many participants are in between, motivated to attend the class to help them because of some current concerns but not thinking seriously about divorce. In these classes, the focus is on learning skills, attitudes, behaviors, and principles that can strengthen and support an intimate and caring relationship. In most classes, there is a lot of emphasis on discovering the key ingredients for good communication and problem solving and practicing good communication skills. Some, but not all, classes take on specific topics like dealing with in-laws, managing money, or building a mutually satisfying sexual relationship. But again, the classes are different from marriage counseling that is done one-on-one or in a small group with a therapist; marriage education does not deal openly with an individual’s or couple’s private issues.

Those who take a marriage and relationship education class almost always report that they enjoyed the class and felt that it helped their marriage. So what does the scientific research show? Can marriage education classes help couples—even struggling ones—improve their marriages? A lot of research has been done on this question. Many marriage education programs have been scientifically evaluated over the past 30 years. A study that reviewed all of the evaluation research on the effectiveness of marriage and relationship education concluded that it was helpful in strengthening communication and problem-solving skills and improving marital satisfaction for both men and women.¹⁹ So there is pretty good evidence that marriage education can be helpful for couples. Also, research suggests that the effectiveness of marriage education doesn’t wear off after just a couple of weeks; couples retain the skills they learned, at least for a while.²⁰ Of course, these are averages. Some couples may not benefit much from marriage education, but others benefit a great deal. Only a few studies have looked specifically at the effectiveness of marriage education for couples who are in serious distress and may be thinking about divorce, but these few studies suggest that distressed couples can benefit from marriage education.²¹

Overall, marriage education is able to help many couples build and maintain a healthier and happier marriage. A successful marriage is about more than just making a

good choice of whom to marry; it is also a learned skill. “Brittany,” a remarried mother with several children, expressed strong feelings about this when we interviewed her:

In my first marriage we didn't have that great of lines of communication, so my thing is, are you willing to go to a seminar together and learn how to communicate better? . . . How much are you willing to sacrifice and do to make it [your marriage] successful?

Box 2.3 describes several well-known and well-tested marriage education programs. You may benefit from exercise 2.2 at the end of this chapter, “Thinking About Education to Strengthen Marriages.”

D. Can marriage counseling help? How can I choose a good counselor?

For couples with serious relationship problems, marriage education classes may not be enough or even appropriate. Individuals and couples who are thinking about divorce should seriously consider seeing a marriage counselor or therapist. Dr. William J. Doherty, a noted marriage scholar and therapist, argues that individuals have a responsibility to themselves, their children, and their communities to try and save a marriage when there are serious problems. He argues that just as it is wrong for someone not to seek treatment for a life-threatening physical illness when there is a reasonable chance for a cure, it is wrong not to seek help to overcome relationship problems that

Box 2.3: Well-Known Marriage and Relationship Education Programs

An excellent source of information about marriage and relationship education is the National Healthy Marriage Resource Center (www.healthymarriageinfo.org/indiv_couple/marriage_edu.index). It has information on common elements of these kinds of programs and finding a program for you. In addition, below is some information about some well-known programs.

- *Art and Science of Love* (www.gottman.com/marriage). This program was developed by one of the premier marriage researchers in the world, Dr. John Gottman, at the University of Washington.
- *CC or Couple Communication* (www.couplecommunication.com). This is one of the most common programs, developed by researchers Drs. Sherod Miller, Daniel Wackman, and Elam Nunnally, at the University of Minnesota.
- *ME or Marriage Encounter* (www.wmme.org). This is a weekend marriage enrichment program. It is associated with the Roman Catholic Church but is open to all.
- *PREP or Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program* (www.prepinc.com). This is one of the most tested programs, developed by researchers at the University of Denver, Drs. Howard Markman and Scott Stanley. Many Utah educators are trained to offer this program. A list of those educators can be found at www.utahmarriage.org.
- *RE or Relationship Enhancement* (www.nire.org). This is one of the earliest programs, developed by Dr. Bernard Guerney, Jr., at Penn State University. It emphasizes listening with empathy.
- *Retrouvaille* (www.retrouvaille.org). This is a weekend program dedicated to helping couples with very serious problems and possibly headed towards divorce to “rediscover” their relationship. (The French word for rediscovery is *retrouvaille*, pronounced “reh-troo-vi,” with a long “i.”) It is associated with the Roman Catholic Church, but all couples are welcome.

•Smart Steps (www.stepfamilies.info/SmartSteps.php). This is a six-session relationship enhancement program designed specifically for remarriages and stepfamilies. It focuses on building couple and family strengths while addressing the unique needs and issues that face stepfamilies. Children and adults attend together in separate sessions then come together at the end for shared activities. The program was designed by Dr. Francesca Adler-Baeder at Auburn University.

threaten the marriage.²² Studies show that 80% of couples see some improvement in their relationship after visiting a marriage counselor.²³ Forty to fifty percent say almost all of their major problems were resolved.²⁴ Unfortunately, only about half of Utahns who divorce get marital counseling (either religious or secular).²⁵

For “Doug” and “Keeshaw,” however, a couple who had serious marital problems early on in their marriage and talked at length about divorce, marriage counseling made a big difference:

One of the things we've worked on since then [when they decided to try and save their marriage], we've actually gone to counseling a lot. . . . Yeah, it's been really helpful. . . . I think it (counseling) opened up a backbone of stability for us. We've done some things that we never thought we'd do.

One thing many people worry about, however, is how to choose a good therapist; not all therapists are created equal when it comes to working on your marriage. Here are some tips on choosing a counselor or therapist and getting the most out of marriage therapy:

- Find a counselor or therapist with education and experience in couples therapy. Therapists who advertise as couples therapists may only be trained in individual therapy, which differs from couples therapy. Ask potential therapists if they received formal education and supervised training in couples therapy. Also, ask what percentage of the therapist's work is with couples.²⁶ In Utah, the Utah Association of Marriage and Family Therapy website (www.uamft.org) maintains a list of licensed marriage therapists in your area.
- Choose a counselor or therapist who is committed to helping you save your marriage. An effective couples therapist focuses on the couple as a unit, rather than as individuals. Focusing only on individual needs may lead a therapist to advocate divorce before working hard to solve relationship problems. And some therapists believe that if someone is unhappy in their marriage then the best solution is usually a divorce rather than trying to work things out. Ask potential therapists about their views of marriage and divorce. Ask what they would choose between saving a troubled marriage and suggesting a couple separate. Also, ask how many of the couples they see

stay together.²⁷ An excellent resource for finding a marriage therapist is the National Registry of Marriage Friendly Therapists (www.marriagefriendlytherapists.com). Recently founded by Dr. William J. Doherty (who was quoted earlier), therapists listed there have the highest training standards in the country and also commit to a set of principles for doing therapy that assures that they will work very hard to help you repair your marriage before exploring the possibility of divorce. The number of Utah therapists on this list is growing.

- Make sure your counselor or therapist has a clear plan of action that is followed through. Effective marital therapy requires structure and direction. If counseling sessions do not seem to be going anywhere, consider a new therapist.²⁸
- Different types of counseling or therapy produce different results. Most forms of therapy produce short-term benefits. However, to achieve long-term results, therapy should focus on changing emotions and thoughts, rather than just teaching communication and other skills. If a therapist seems to focus only on changing what you should do, without also changing what you feel and think, the positive benefits may not last.²⁹
- Do not assume that more expensive counseling or therapy is better. Just because a therapist requires a higher fee does not mean you are getting better therapy.³⁰ Also, although therapy seems expensive, if it can save your marriage it will be less expensive in the long run than a divorce. Also, some therapists have sliding fees and will reduce the costs for lower-income couples. Some universities have therapy training programs and offer counseling with therapists-in-training at low rates. Some insurance companies will pay for a limited number of sessions (probably about 4) with a therapist. If you have insurance, check to see if your insurer will pay for this benefit. Some families receive assistance from Medicaid. Medicaid often helps pay for counseling for individuals, couples, and families.
- Consider working with religious leaders or counselors. Many people prefer to work with religious leaders or counselors because they are more confident that they share their values.³¹ Several of the people we interviewed while we were writing this guidebook mentioned how guidance from their religious leader was important to them. Sometimes a religious leader acts as a full-fledged marriage counselor. However, not all religious leaders have the training and experience to effectively counsel married couples. So the considerations listed above should also be applied to religious counselors. Some religious groups also provide programs to help couples at the crossroads of divorce. For example, Retrouvaille (www.retrouvaille.org), sponsored by the Roman Catholic Church but available to all, is designed to help religious couples save their marriages. The program is taught by couples that once had serious problems but successfully avoided divorce. A national organization called Marriage Savers (www.marriagesavers.com) works with churches in a community to improve marriage and avoid divorce. Both programs report high rates of success.³²
- Stick with it. The couples that show the most improvement in therapy are those that stick with it.³³ If the above guidelines are met, avoid dropping out early.

- One-partner therapy can be effective. While having both husband and wife together in therapy is usually ideal, if one partner cannot or will not attend, therapy can still be beneficial to the couple.³⁴ If only one partner will be attending therapy, it is even more important that the therapist is committed to your marriage and is experienced in couples therapy.

You may benefit from exercise 2.3, “Thinking About Marriage Counseling,” at the end of this chapter.

Reconciliation is a process of getting back together that requires the full participation of both spouses and is experienced by as many as 10% of married couples.

E. Do divorcing couples sometimes reconcile and get back together? When is reconciliation likely to be successful?

Reconciliation is a process of getting back together that requires the full participation of both spouses. In Utah, it appears that about 10%–15% of couples who file for divorce decide not to go through with it, at least at that time.³⁵ Some preliminary research in Minnesota found that about 10% of couples there were interested in a reconciliation service, even at the last stages of the divorce process.³⁶ One study estimated that about one-third of couples who attempt to reconcile were still married a year later.³⁷ Researchers also estimate that about one in three couples who actually divorce later try to reconcile, but only about one-third of those who try actually succeed.³⁸

One couple we know who had several children reconciled and realized that “the grass was not greener” on the other side of the divorce fence. One of the spouses after the divorce was considering remarrying another person. She realized that no relationship is perfect and that although this new partner did not have some of the characteristics that created conflict with her ex-spouse, there were other problems that did not exist in her first marriage. She decided to talk with her first husband before marrying. Instead of remarrying someone else, the couple was able to reconcile and remarry. Their children were elated after enduring the every-other weekend visiting schedule. The parents have now been happily remarried for many years.

In our interviews with various individuals who had been at the crossroads of divorce, we noticed that many tried to reconcile but success was elusive. “Laura’s” story illustrates both the hope and the ultimate discouragement that can accompany reconciliation attempts:

[My husband] came back about a month [after the separation] with all of his stuff at the front door, and me opening the front door. And he told me, “I am coming home.” And I’m like, “What?” And we had kind of talked through things. The thing was that we were really, really good friends. . . . [Later] I discovered that I was 5 months pregnant! I was in such shock I didn’t know

whether to be happy or sad. We went up to see my husband and I couldn't even talk; I was in such shock. My mom told him that he was going to be a father and he was ecstatic. He truly, truly was because he had wanted a child and he wanted me to be the mother of his child. . . . I got really, really sick. Within a couple of days, I was in the hospital, I was bleeding already. . . . Long story short, I couldn't get a hold of my husband [that night]. I was in the hospital the whole night and so I finally called his friend, and I said, "I know you don't want to hear me, but I can't find my husband and I just lost the baby, so if you could please just call him." My husband was at my mother's front door within probably about ten minutes. I saw the stamp on his hand. He had been at a nightclub all night, and that just put it all in perspective for me. I said, "Mom, I don't care what it takes, but we need to push this divorce through."

There are a number of factors that make reconciliation more likely, many of which were not going in "Laura's" favor. Couples who have the same religion and attend religious services regularly are more likely to reconcile. So are those who were older when they got married and who are closer in age, and who have more education.³⁹ One researcher who interviewed couples who had faced difficult marital problems but had successfully reconciled discovered two interesting points that contributed to their success.⁴⁰ First, these couples made reconciliation their top priority. Commitment was essential and was demonstrated by their actions: accepting responsibility for their mistakes, changing behavior, and offering forgiveness. Second, they did not do it alone; they sought out religious and/or professional help and received the support of family and friends. Many had little hope of fixing things when they began but were able to persevere. They attended marriage education classes, seminars, or retreats, read marriage books, or went to counseling. Some made significant changes in their environment, such as moving or changing churches. They drew on the personal history they had built together that included their children, all they had invested in the relationship, and their years of friendship. They acknowledged the strengths in their relationship and cut out anything that would not aid reconciliation.

Couples who have the same religion and attend religious services regularly are more likely to reconcile, as well as those who were older when they married, closer in age, and have more education.

Another couple we know who divorced realized too late that their hostile attitudes toward each other in a time of crisis led to their divorce. The problem escalated as family, friends, and co-workers got involved in the marital conflict. Neither spouse made a sincere attempt to communicate and because the divorce was filed in haste to show the seriousness of the problem, neither was willing to try and make the relationship work. A year later as they sat down and discussed the issues that led to the divorce, they then decided to make reconciliation their top priority. The couple regretted their hasty decision and lack

of problem-solving skills at the time of their divorce. They remarried and have since had children and have been happily married for more than a decade.

In addition, researchers have found that insecure individuals are more likely to try to keep an unhappy marriage together, probably because they are afraid of not being in a relationship or afraid they will not find another relationship. Insecurity is grounded in feelings of low self-worth and fear of abandonment. Insecure individuals are more likely over time to feel unhappy in their marriages, but also more likely to be motivated to try to keep their marriages together, despite their dissatisfaction.⁴¹ Related to feelings of insecurity are feelings of extreme dependence. A mutual dependence between spouses is important to a healthy marriage, but extreme dependence is a sign of insecurity; these individuals depend almost completely on their spouses to fulfill their feelings of self-worth and security. As a result, these individuals are more likely to try to keep their marriages together, even if they are unhealthy relationships.⁴² Good therapists can assist people with feelings of insecurity and extreme dependence,⁴³ helping perhaps to turn an unhappy marriage into a happy marriage and avoiding the further negative effects of divorce on insecure adults and other family members.⁴⁴

We recognize that reconciliation may not be wise in many cases, especially when there has been abuse in the family. (We discuss abuse and infidelity in Chapter 3.) And many who try to get back together and make things work do not succeed. But some do succeed with dedication and effort. You may benefit from exercise 2.4, “Thinking About Reconciliation,” at the end of the chapter.

F. What if I'm willing to try to save my marriage but my spouse doesn't seem willing?

It is hard to imagine anything more frustrating than wanting to save your marriage but your spouse isn't interested. Many spouses in this situation feel powerless; they don't believe that they “deserve” divorce. But in our legal system one spouse can make that decision alone regardless of the circumstances.

You may feel that you would do anything to make things right. This desire can be a real turning point for some marriages. If you are willing to do whatever it would take to make this marriage work, think seriously about what your spouse is asking from you now—more space, more partnership with money or housework, more interaction with your children, less nagging, less time with buddies, less time on the computer or the TV. What might happen if you honored your spouse's request? If your spouse were able to see you differently than he or she has before, what might be the result? One book that may be helpful if you are in this situation is *The Divorce Remedy: The Proven 7-Step Program for Saving Your Marriage*, by Michele Weiner Davis.

Some spouses are willing to give things a second chance once they see that their partners are truly committed and sincere about change. Other spouses feel like there is just “too much water under the bridge.” Your marriage may or may not be possible to save at this point; your spouse may not reconsider, no matter how much you try to make things better.

Although it may be hard to imagine your future at all, and although it may seem too early even to consider it, most people do remarry. Understanding now what you can do to be a better spouse can help you in a future marriage. So, you may want to consider: How did this marriage get to this point? What are some of the things that you could have done differently to make the marriage better a year ago, or two years ago, or ten years ago?

G. What is a “healthy” marriage?

In all this discussion about ways to repair marriages and keep families together, some may not have a clear idea of what is a “healthy” marriage. Perhaps some grew up in a home and neighborhood without seeing good examples of a healthy marriage. So we should probably pause here and clarify what it means to have a healthy marriage. While there are many opinions about this, we think one of the best definitions comes from a research organization called Child Trends that examined hundreds of studies to come up with 10 characteristics that define a healthy marriage.⁴⁵

- ❖ **Commitment:** Spouses have a long-term perspective toward their relationship; they intend to persevere when troubles come up; they are willing to sacrifice their personal needs for each other. Commitment involves dedication and constraints. We talk more about commitment in Chapter 3.
- ❖ **Satisfaction:** Overall, individuals are happy and satisfied with their relationship. This does not mean that marriage is without problems and challenges, or that married couples don’t go through periods when they are not happy in their marriages. But overall, healthy marriages are happy, satisfying relationships. About 90% of married people at any one time say they are very satisfied with their marriage.⁴⁶
- ❖ **Communication:** Couples interact with each other to exchange information and solve problems in respectful, positive ways. The way that couples communicate with each other—in positive and negative ways—is one of the strongest indicators of how healthy a relationship is and whether the marriage will last.⁴⁷
- ❖ **Effective Conflict Resolution:** Virtually all couples have serious differences and disagreements. How they handle these disagreements can make the difference between a healthy and unhealthy relationship. An important indicator of a healthy marriage is a couple’s ability to deal with a conflict without criticism, contempt, or defensiveness.⁴⁸
- ❖ **Lack of Violence and Abuse:** While conflict is a normal part of marriage, aggression and violence indicate an unhealthy relationship. This includes verbal, physical, emotional, and sexual aggression and abuse. Abuse of any children in the relationship also is unacceptable.
- ❖ **Fidelity or Faithfulness:** Spouses are sexually faithful to each other; they keep intimate physical relationships within the bonds of marriage. Virtually all

married individuals endorse this value. Infidelity is one of the most common reasons people give for a divorce. And individuals can be emotionally unfaithful to their spouse without actual sexual involvement.⁴⁹ Most married individuals remain sexually faithful to their spouses; only about 10–15 percent of women and 25 percent of men report they were unfaithful to their spouse while they were married.⁵⁰

- ❖ **Intimacy and Emotional Support:** Couples in a healthy marriage are physically and emotionally intimate with each other. They trust, care for, and love each other.
- ❖ **Friendship and Spending Time Together:** While couples are different in the amount of time they spend interacting and doing things together, in a healthy marriage couples enjoy being together. They are friends; they respect each other and enjoy each other's company. Friendship and time together may be more important to some cultural groups than to others,⁵¹ but especially in America, they are highly valued in a marriage.
- ❖ **Commitment to Children:** Not all married couples have children, or have children living with them. But in a healthy marriage with children, the couple is committed to the development and well-being of all their children.
- ❖ **Duration and Legal Status:** The optimal environment for raising children is a family with two biological (or adoptive) parents in a stable, healthy marriage. Believing in the permanence of the relationship actually helps to sustain a healthy marriage; those who don't believe that marriage should be permanent have a harder time sustaining a healthy marriage.⁵² Marriage represents an important legal status. Marriage is not only a commitment to another person but also a public commitment to society to behave in certain constructive ways. And in turn, society supports the relationship and the children in that union.⁵³

It's important to remember that couples have healthy marriages to varying degrees; it's not an either/or situation. And marriages have ups and downs. But these characteristics are a good definition of a healthy marriage. You may want to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of your marriage with exercise 2.5, "How Healthy Is My Marriage?" at the end of the chapter.

Exercises for Chapter 2

2.1: Hanging On or Moving On?

As was mentioned in Chapter 2, most individuals who say they are unhappy in their marriage, if they can hang on for a few years, end up saying that they are happy again. This exercise is designed to help you think about hanging on as a possible option

for you. Of course, we realize that some people don't have a choice; their spouse is insisting on a divorce.

A. What are some reasons for “hanging on” and trying to make things work out? List them here:

B. Are there some reasons why it might not be wise to “hang on” and try to make things work out? List them here:

C. What are the stresses on your marriage that are making things difficult? Consider both “inside” stresses (e.g., kids demand a lot of time) and “outside” stresses (e.g., demanding job, financial pressures)? Then think about whether those stresses are likely to change in a positive way over the next few years? Are there things you could do to reduce those stresses?

What is the stress? How likely to change? What could you do to reduce it?

What have you learned from thinking about these issues? What do you think will happen if you “hang on” for the next few years and try and make things work? Write down your thoughts here:

2.2: Thinking About Education to Strengthen Marriages.

What have you done recently to try and strengthen your marriage? Some couples, even ones with some serious problems who are thinking about divorce, try some educational resources to try and improve their relationship.

A. What books have you read to try and strengthen your marriage? How helpful were they? If you haven’t done this, look at the list of suggested books on page 13 in this guidebook and pick one to read, either by yourself or together as a couple. Write down the title here and set a goal for a date to read the book.

B. What websites have you visited to try and strengthen your marriage? How helpful were they? If you haven’t done this, look at the list of suggested websites on page 13 in this guidebook and pick one to browse, either by yourself or together as a couple. Write down the name and address of the website and set a goal for a date to visit the site or do it right now.

C. Have you ever taken a marriage-strengthening class together (including a marriage preparation education class)? If so, what do you remember about that experience? What did you learn? How did you feel about the experience? Do you think it was helpful? Write down your thoughts here:

D. Do you think you would benefit from taking a marriage-strengthening class, either by yourself or with your spouse, to help you resolve problems and communicate more effectively and increase your satisfaction with your marriage? Why or why not? As you answer this question, consider whether you would feel comfortable or awkward in class with other couples working on improving their marriages. Write down your thoughts here:

E. Are you aware of some marriage-strengthening classes in your area? Does your church or other religious group offer marriage-strengthening classes? The Utah Healthy Marriage Initiative website (www.utahmarriage.org or call 801-526-9317) lists marriage education classes in the state. Box 2.3 lists a number of popular programs and their websites. Do a little investigation of local resources and write down a few possibilities that you might be interested in here:

2.3: Thinking About Marriage Counseling.

People have different thoughts and feelings about seeking marriage counseling, some positive, some negative, and some just unsure. Interestingly, most couples do not get counseling before they divorce. This exercise is designed to help you sort out your own thoughts and feelings about getting some formal marriage counseling to help you with the challenges you are experiencing in your marriage.

A. Have you had some marriage counseling before? ___ No ___ Yes. If yes, how was that experience for you? Was it helpful? Was it enjoyable? Why or why not?

B. How comfortable do you think you would feel getting marriage counseling? Write down some of your thoughts and feelings about the following questions. Also, think about how your spouse might answer these questions.

- Are you willing to take an honest look at yourself and your part in how your relationship is struggling and how it could be improved?

Your feelings:

Your spouse's feelings:

- Are you willing to allow a marriage counselor help you learn to communicate more effectively with your spouse?

Your feelings:

Your spouse's feelings:

- How willing are you to share deep, personal thoughts and feelings in a counseling session?

Your feelings:

Your spouse's feelings:

- How willing are you to do “homework” assignments to work on your relationship, if your marriage counselor asks you to?

Your feelings:

Your spouse’s feelings:

- Overall, how comfortable do you think you would be with marriage counseling?

Your feelings:

Your spouse’s feelings:

C. Does your religious organization offer marriage counseling? No Yes.

If yes, do you think you would feel more or less comfortable with counseling from a religious leader?

More comfortable Less comfortable. Why?

D. In this chapter we suggested various ways that you could find a good marriage counselor. Review these suggestions. Then, if you were to decide to get some counseling, write down how you would go about finding a good marriage counselor.

E. If you decide to get marriage counseling, how would you pay for it? Although some religious organizations offer free counseling, secular counselors charge a fee. Does your insurance company pay for marriage counseling? Yes No Unsure. If your insurance company will pay for marriage counseling, how many sessions will they help pay for? ____ sessions. (You may need to consult with your insurance company or employer's human resources department to find this out.) If you would need to pay for marriage counseling yourself, how much would you be willing to pay? (In Chapters 7 and 8 you will read more about how expensive a divorce can be; effective counseling is less costly.) \$ _____.

F. So overall, how willing do you think you and your spouse would be to get some marriage counseling? (Circle your answer.)

	Not at all Willing	Maybe a little Willing	Somewhat Willing	Very Willing
You	√	√	√	√
Your Spouse	√	√	√	√

2.4: Thinking about Reconciliation.

It's not uncommon for couples who are separated or heading for divorce to try and reconcile and keep trying to work things out. Sometimes reconciliation is successful but other times it is not. This brief exercise is designed to help you think about the possibility of reconciliation and how helpful it might be.

A. Priorities. Reconciliation is more likely to be successful when both spouses make strengthening the marriage a high priority. How committed would you be? How committed do you think your spouse would be? (Circle your answer.)

	Not at all Committed	Maybe a little Committed	Somewhat Committed	Very Committed
You	√	√	√	√
Your Spouse	√	√	√	√

If you decided to reconcile, what specific things could you do to make strengthening your marriage a high priority? Think about “big” things like going together to a marriage education class or marriage counseling. Also think about some “small” things like a regular time each day to talk and reconnect, praying together daily, a weekly date, dropping some demands on your time, developing some shared interests, etc. Brainstorm some ideas and write them down:

So overall, how much support would you have for reconciliation? Write down your thoughts here:

C. Remembering the Good Times. When you think back on your relationship, both before you got married and after, can you think of good, positive times? When couples are going through hard times, it is common to focus on the bad and not remember the good times and good features of the relationship. But if you can recall those good times and good aspects of the relationship, then you have a better chance of being able to work through your challenges and keep your marriage together. A marriage that was built on friendship and fondness sometimes can be revived, despite the challenges you are facing now. This exercise is designed to help you try to remember the good times and good parts of your relationship.

• What do you remember about dating your spouse? What attracted her/him to you? What did you enjoy doing together? Write down some of your thoughts here:

• Why did you choose to marry your spouse? What influenced you to make such a big decision to decide to spend your life together with this person? Write down your thoughts here:

• What do you remember about your engagement? Your wedding? What are some of the positive memories from these times? Write down your thoughts here:

• Despite your current problems, what positive things do you still see in your marriage? What good characteristics do you still see in your spouse? Write down your thoughts here:

• Have you gone through some tough times together before? What kept you going through those times? Write down your thoughts here:

• If you have been able to remember some of the good features of your marriage and your spouse, it helps you to see the possibility of a better future. What have you learned by trying to remember the good times? Write down your thoughts here:

2.5: Elements of a Healthy Marriage: How Important Are They?

A. Elements of a Healthy Marriage. Researchers have identified 10 essential elements of a healthy marriage. How important are these 10 elements to you? For each of the 10 elements, make a quick judgment about how important it is to you.

Essential Element: Definition	How important is this to you? (circle one)		
	Not important 0	Somewhat Important 1	Very Important 2
1. <u>Commitment</u> : each spouse has a long-term perspective of the marriage and an intention to persevere through hard times; each spouse is committed to the well-being of the other.	0	1	2
2. <u>Satisfaction</u> : the marriage is a source of happiness for each spouse.	0	1	2
3. <u>Communication</u> : the couple is able to talk and communicate with each other in positive and respectful ways.	0	1	2
4. <u>Conflict resolution</u> : the couple is able to handle differences and conflicts and solve problems in a positive way.	0	1	2
5. <u>Lack of violence</u> : neither spouse is abusive of other or their children, physically, psychologically, or sexually.	0	1	2
6. <u>Fidelity</u> : spouses are sexually faithful to one another; sex is reserved for one's spouse and no one else.	0	1	2
7. <u>Friendship/time together</u> : spouses are friends; they like and respect each other; they know each other well; they enjoy spending time together.	0	1	2
8. <u>Intimacy/emotional support</u> : spouses trust, care, and love each other; they are affectionate.	0	1	2
9. <u>Commitment to children</u> : each spouse is committed to the well-being of all of their children.	0	1	2
10. <u>Duration/legal status</u> : a couple makes a formal legal commitment (marriage) and plan for the marriage to endure.	0	1	2

This was a very quick assessment of how important each of these elements of a healthy marriage is to you. People will differ in how important certain elements are. What have you learned by considering how important these elements are to you?

Next is a little more detailed questionnaire to help you evaluate the different strengths and weaknesses in your relationship.

B. Evaluating the Strengths and Weaknesses of Your Relationship.

If you are like most couples, your relationship has both weaknesses and strengths. How do you rate your relationship? What can you do to keep the strong areas strong? What can you do to improve the problem areas? This quiz can help you think about these questions.

The questions come from a research study that looked at the quality of relationships.⁵⁴ The study included 1,550 couples who are typical of all couples in the United States. The researchers who did this study found that a person's answers to the quiz can tell a lot about the quality of a relationship, but it's not perfect.

Here's how the quiz works: Answer these 30 questions and then add up the score. Then you can go through an exercise to find the strengths in your relationship and areas where you need to make improvements.

You can do the quiz on your own. If you feel comfortable, both you and your spouse could take the quiz separately, then share your results. Use the tips at the end to help you appreciate your strengths and talk about ways to work on your weaknesses.

For each question, circle the number below the answer that best matches your feelings. Remember, the usefulness of this quiz depends on how much you know about yourself and your partner and how honest you are in your responses.

In your relationship, how satisfied are you with:					
	Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
1. Your overall relationship with your spouse?	1	2	3	4	5
2. The quality of your communication?	1	2	3	4	5
3. The love you experience?	1	2	3	4	5

How is your SPOUSE in your relationship?					
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
4. My spouse understands my feelings.	1	2	3	4	5
5. My spouse listens to me in an understanding way.	1	2	3	4	5
6. My spouse uses a tactless choice of words when she or he complains.	5	4	3	2	1

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
7. My spouse doesn't censor his/her complaints at all. She/he really lets me have it full force.	5	4	3	2	1

How often do these words or phrases describe YOU?

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
8. Worrier	5	4	3	2	1
9. Nervous	5	4	3	2	1
10. Depressed	5	4	3	2	1
11. Feel hopeless	5	4	3	2	1
12. Fight with others/lose temper	5	4	3	2	1
13. Easily irritated or mad	5	4	3	2	1

How often do these words/expressions describe YOUR SPOUSE?

14. Worrier	5	4	3	2	1
15. Nervous	5	4	3	2	1
16. Depressed	5	4	3	2	1
17. Feel hopeless	5	4	3	2	1
18. Fight with others/lose temper	5	4	3	2	1
19. Easily irritated or mad	5	4	3	2	1

How much do you agree with the following statements about the family you grew up with?

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	It depends	Agree	Strongly Agree
20. I'm still having trouble dealing with some issues from my family while growing up.	5	4	3	2	1
21. Some issues from my family while growing up make it hard for me to form close relationships	5	4	3	2	1

How often have the following areas been a problem in your relationship?					
	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Very Often
22. Financial matters	5	4	3	2	1
23. Communication	5	4	3	2	1
24. Intimacy/sexuality	5	4	3	2	1
25. Parents/In-laws	5	4	3	2	1
26. Roles (who does what)	5	4	3	2	1
27. Time spent together	5	4	3	2	1
28. How often have you thought your relationship might be in trouble?	5	4	3	2	1
29. How often is your current SPOUSE violent toward you?	5	4	3	2	1
30. How often are YOU violent toward your current partner?	5	4	3	2	1

Score your quiz now. To score your quiz, just add up the numbers you circled. Your score should be between 30–150.

Your Score: _____

What Your Score Means: A higher number indicates more areas of strength and fewer areas of weakness. A lower number indicates more areas of weakness that you may need to work on to improve the quality of your relationship.

C. Learn from the Quiz: What Are Your Strengths and Weaknesses? All couples have strengths and challenges in their relationships. List and talk about your strengths and areas for improvement.

Strengths. For the questions in this quiz, higher numbers indicate strengths in your relationship. So, from your answers to the quiz, list the greatest strengths in your relationship.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Think and talk about these strengths. Don't take them for granted. How can you maintain and nurture these strengths?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Weaknesses. For the questions in this quiz, lower numbers indicate weaknesses in your relationship. From your answers to the quiz, list some challenges in your relationship that you could work on.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

Think and talk together about these challenges. What can you do to improve in these areas?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

There are easy ways to get a more detailed, in-depth look at all the different aspects of your relationship. For instance, here are some relationship inventories, or questionnaires, that you can access over the Internet that allow you to answer many detailed questions about your relationship with your spouse (privately). Then you get detailed feedback on the strengths and weaknesses in your relationship.

Relationship Inventory	Web Address	Associated University
• FOCCUS	www.foccusinc.com	Creighton University
• Enrich	www.prepare-enrich.com	University of Minnesota
• RELATE	relate.byu.edu	Brigham Young University